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The changing pattern of the Indian family structure: A review of the position of women

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Abstract

The Indian family structure has evolved and transformed with the advent of industrialization and globalization. What was once a compact and consolidated framework is now reduced to a nuclear formation, especially in the urban spaces? The New Indian Family is outwardly progressive, tolerant, and modern; it allows its women to seek a college education and work after marriage. The metropolitan family also includes working mothers, highly qualified wives, and single female parents. The following paper deals with the study of women's position, the practiced gender roles, gender identities, and women's agency in the space of the current family system.

Keywords: Nuclear family, agency, gender inequality, domestic violence, oppression.

Introduction

The family is a universal institution that has always been an integral part of human society. It is the most important social group of which a human being is a part of and in which a child grows up to be an adult. Being a primary social group, the family has an immense influence on its members. The quality of relationships and experiences people gain inside a family impact their association with the world at large. Families can be classified based on many fields such as the type of marriage (Polygamous/Polyandrous/Monogamous), nature of residence (Matrilocal/Patrilocal), ancestry (Matrilineal/ Patrilineal), nature of authority (Matriarchal/Patriarchal), structure (Nuclear/Joint), nature of relations (Conjugal/Consanguine).

The institution of marriage and the structure of family and household constitute a significant part of India's social and economic lives. The traditional Indian family is a Joint structure which typically consists of three or more generations living in the same household along with their spouses. Over time and with the emergence of industrialization, modernization, urbanization, globalization, and mass migration to urban areas, the structure became frail. With the shift in the millennia, urban and semi-urban India saw significant transformations in family structure. Nuclear families started increasing and preferred by the new generation due to various socio-economic and cultural reasons. Modern urban India saw an increase in the number of two-person and four-person households, including only two generations, the parent and the children. Such a rapid change in the composition of the primary social group was bound to influence other aspects of the society at large, and so it did.

The Indian woman's position in a nuclear family is very different from that of a woman in a Joint family. This paper aims at scrutinizing the question of the Indian woman in a family. Its goal is to analyze the different perspectives of gender, gender roles, and women in the Indian family structure and understand the multi-layered complications that are interrelated and affect various other instruments connected to the family. It reviews literature such as academic papers and book chapters to understand what contemporary social scientists think of the points mentioned above and that the Indian family system has somewhat quickly changed in the last half-century after Independence.

Gender Hierarchy structure of the Indian family system

Based on the 2011 Census Data, about 27 million households accounting for 11 percent of the country's total households are headed by females. It is clear from the data that the Indian family is still, at large, controlled, and run by the males. Gender hierarchy is a crucial aspect of Indian families. Girls and boys are treated differently inside homes, since birth. An acute case of gender bias dominates the Indian society at large. The yesteryear form of family, the traditional joint family saw a single head in a household, and the family tree was drawn around that person.

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Other family members were related to that one single person and were considered as placed below the head. The women of the household, particularly, were placed further below at the ultimate receiving end. In a traditional Indian family, a newborn son was a door to opportunities. He was supposed to gain education and either join the family business or become an earning member. He was also supposed to bring in a woman (a human resource for the family and the breeder of heirs to the lineage) and a substantial dowry. This made the males assets.

On the other hand, women, who were devoid of all agency and right to make choices, were considered to be born only to be given away in marriage. The bringing up of a girl child and the massive expenditure of a woman's marriage and dowry made her a liability. Although treating women as a burden is omnipresent in all sections of Indian society, it is more visible in the rural middle and lower classes than the urban middle class. Moreover, female headship in an Indian family is seldom the case during the presence of the husband. Most of the female-headed households are formed due to widowhood, divorce, separation, or abandonment. In rural and urban areas, and across all classes, women get to have agency only in the absence of the men from the family.

Aparajita Chowdhury in *Gender and Generations perspective in Understanding Indian Family Life*, (Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Science and Humanities; Volume 1; Issue 3; Feb 2015; pp 139) says, "Gender relationship is learnt within the family from very early days through the recognition of the special value accorded to male children in the traditional Indian family." Presumed to be the assets and, most notably, the heir of the lineage, boys are treated with great importance from a very young age. In a typical Indian family, a boy's health, education, and allover growth are given utmost attention and validity. From a very early stage, boys are encouraged to be regulars at school and regularly engage in physical activities. On the other hand, girls are sent to school not because they are also expected to build a career and a healthy body. Still, they need to have the necessary qualifications to be married to an educated man and a respectable family. While boys were enrolled for sports as extracurricular activities, girls were taught life skills, which included cooking, cleaning, and embroidery, and were registered to gain artistic skills such as painting, singing, and dancing (restricted to traditional Indian dance forms). For years, the conventional joint family has enforced this notion within the threshold of the household. With changes in the family's pattern and increase in two-member and four-member households, the scenario has changed over time. However, even to this day, the education and the well-being of a girl child has less importance than that of her brother. The boys who grow up viewing such discrimination being practiced daily and in every household sector grow up to be deeply conditioned human beings who keep on implementing the same bias in the workplace and outside the consanguineous family.

Agency of the Indian Woman and her Well-Being.

It is widely known that not only has the Indian family been a composed structure, but it has also been patriarchal as well, much like the Indian society in totality. Be it the traditional joint family system or the modern nuclear family, the woman is remotely the decision-maker of the household.

The role that women play in an average middle-class Indian home is that of a child-bearer and caretaker. These are the primary gender roles that every woman in a family has to adhere to, even the ones who work outside the house. There has been a significant rise in the number of women in the workforce, which implies that more and more women are moving towards a career of their own and financial independence. While the surface data might show us increasing numbers of female participation in the field of work, what it fails to report is the overburdening of working women living in a household with a husband and children. In spite of working both inside and outside the family and attending to every need of the members of the family, the Indian woman does not enjoy agency in the household. They don't hold the power to decide something on behalf of the family or even the children. We often observe mothers threatening their children to report their actions to the father. This is a clear example of how a woman, who gave birth to the child, tends to all their need and supports them throughout, is deprived of the agency to discipline the child. This, in turn, affects the well-being of the woman in context, and thus it invariably involves the household at large.

Amartya Sen, in the essay, "Women and Men" from his book, *"The Argumentative Indian"* (Ch-11; pp-220) says, "For while gender inequality has many faces, these are not independent. Rather, they speak to each other and sometimes strongly encourage one another. For example, when women lack decisional power within the family, which amounts to a deprivation of women's effective agency, this can also adversely affect their own well-being."

He further explains how various kinds of deprivation can actually be linked with each other through a causal connection. Sen, in his essay, formulates several ways in which gender inequality is present in Indian society, starting from female foeticide to domestic violence.

The way females are perceived in Indian society is the result of centuries of profound seated patriarchal conception, which is why they are denied agency. While the traditional joint family has disintegrated, the patriarchy is difficult to eradicate. In modern India, the men of the household allow women to pursue academics and work. The in-laws have to enable a newly-wed daughter-in-law to continue her career, and if not, marriage is often deemed impossible or the son disowned. The primary concern is the household's administration, as to who will take on the responsibility of the daily chores if both members of a family are working. According to the widely accepted gender roles, the woman is supposed to run all the errands in the household. Hence, the practical problem of lack of time to dedicate to the family is a significant reason why women are not allowed to work after marriage. It is a direct seizure of the agency of women, which ultimately leaves a bitter mark on their well-being and which in turn affects their relationship with their own children and spouse.

Agency is an essential determinant of a person's destiny in life, and having the power to decide or choose is a critical step towards forming a sense of self. Indian women, who are brought up with a set of rules exclusively designed for their gender, often lag in the real world situations for the lack of agency that becomes a part of them. This, in turn, affects their aspirations and goals in life. When we ask a male child about what they want to become when they grow up, they often choose to be pilots and astronauts, but a

female child, on the other hand, decides to be a teacher or a doctor. While being a teacher involves using the feminine qualities of nurturing abilities, being a doctor is a respectful profession to the Indian Middle-Class female. None of these professions are supposed to distract the female from a family life that otherwise is effected by the careers chosen by the males. This is just another form of deprivation that the Indian female is put through. After crossing a threshold in age, almost every Indian woman is poked with the question of marriage and a life partner, and most of the time, its other females ask these questions. While a man of a certain age is asked about their achievements in the career and possibilities of the future, the females are made to believe that marriage and having a family of one's won with children is the main aim of their life. There is seldom any acknowledgment of the growth or achievement in the workplace for females. This phenomenon subordinately discourages women who have been able to alter conditioning and been successful in cultivating agency in themselves to perform well in the workspace.

The Indian society and thus the Indian family system, at large, is patriarchal, and it is reflected in everyday life. Inside the family, various parameters can be used to recognize the degree of agency a woman has in the family. In the essay *Women and Agency*, ("The Indian Family in Transition Reading Literary and Cultural Texts"; Ch. -2; pp-67), Mukul Mukherjee lists the following indicators

1. "1. Women's ability to control decisions about their productive and economic activities, including freedom of movement and control over the resulting wages or income.
2. Women's ability to control the type of household structure in terms of composition (for example, extended or not, female-headed or not), size, or duration.
3. Degree of discrepancy between men's and women's ratios of time spent in income earnings to that in leisure time.
4. Women's membership in economic and social collectives and formal or informal groups (credit or loan associations, cooperatives, etc.).
5. Women's ability to have an important say (if not to make the actual decision) in decisions which affect their lives, such as major purchases, building a house, family size (including having a child at a particular time of life and work), moving or not moving to another town, etc. (Rothschild, 1982: 128)."

There are various areas inside a household and a marriage that are given to the women and numerous others that are reserved for the patriarchal head. In case of decisions which do not entail a lot of problems and doesn't result in a massive change, such as what food to cook, what color of bedsheet to buy, what seed to plant in the garden, women seem to have autonomy. Other premises such as place of residence, healthcare plans for the family, insurance and taxes, investments, budgeting, and children's careers are considerably taken care of by the male members. In the urban form of nuclear family structures, non-working women are often provided with an allowance by their husbands. Such subsidies were seldom the case when women resided in a joint family structure. Although it might seem that such a change is proof that women are getting freedom and agency inside the house, it also proves that

even in the modern and developed family organization, they lack self-dependence, especially in the financial field. The economic position is an essential factor in the determination of the worth of any human being, especially in the capitalist society that we live in currently. Thus, income generation is an essential aspect of which relies on the autonomy and authority of women in a household. Studies have shown that more power is vested on women who work outside the home and generate equal income as their male counterparts. Ideally, the nuclear family gives women space to step out in the outside world and build a career for themselves due to the absence of the in-laws' governing bodies. However, women who choose to work outside are not discharged from the "wifely" or "motherly" duties. Instead, they have to work twice as hard as men.

Metropolitan Urban India has also seen a rise in the number of single-parent households, and most of them are single-mother households. This results from ever-increasing divorce rates, the disintegration of social stigma around pre-marital sex, loss of faith, and believe in the family structure, and many other reasons.

The main problem that single mothers (and even single fathers) face is the society's intrusion into their private lives and the constant pestering to find a partner. The heteronormative idea of a patriarchal family is so ingrained into the system that people can hardly believe that a single parent is at all able to raise a child on their own. In the case of a single female raising a child, the family needs a husband or a father to provide them with security and guardianship. This furthermore proves how much less faith is placed on the agency and capabilities of women. In the case of a single father, the family needs a mother, someone who would provide the child with care and take care of the household. Again, a woman is required for a family to fit into the roles dictated by "femininity" to provide care and for the essential management of the household. The impression of "Man makes a house, a woman makes it home" is well suited in this scenario. It is widely assumed that men are clumsy, unorganized, and esthetically unpleasant, and hence it falls on the woman to transform a mould of concrete into a place that is inhabitable and pleasant. And that is why a single female parent needs a husband to provide the mother and child with the house, and the single male parent who already has the house and child needs a woman to complete the family and the home.

As I have mentioned before, Sen noted down six forms of gender-based inequality present in the Indian society and under "*Unequal Facilities*" (pp 233), he writes, "There are inequalities also in social participation, especially when women are confined to their homes and incarcerated within traditional family lives." Traditional gender roles dictate women to be responsible for the household and sets their primary function as the caregiver. To fulfill such positions should be the aim and aspiration of the women. As such, expectations limit the women and confine them in an indoor space with the members of the family and hence ultimately curbs the exposure to various opportunities that the world provides. With the changing system of family, women have gained more independence to choose for themselves, although it comes with a price. Indian family system might have developed, and nuclear families might be widespread, but the years of conditioning in the family is long from being gone. Although the newly-weds decide to stay away from the parents and in-laws, there is a constant influence of

the extended family. They often pick at working women during a family event and try to guilt them into dedicating most of their time in the household chores and in the care of the husband. All such implied notions make the woman question her choices and dislocate her towards her drawing force's opposite side. This widespread situation creates another bias, which gives rise to another hurdle in the path of accomplishment. The prejudice is born in the workplace and is cultivated by the patriarchy that dominates every space of the society. Even in modern urban workplaces, we see very few female heads. Sure, the numbers are increasing, but even today, gaining a promotion or a pay raise is much more difficult for a woman than a man. The reason is not that men are more qualified in general but because the society at large assumes women to be incapable of being in charge of responsibilities that include important decision-making tasks.

This takes us back to the question of agency again. The very fact that family at large denies agency to its women is the reason for the widely prevalent concept that women are incompetent workers in the outside world. Employers are part of society. They have been part of the family system. They have themselves contributed to the propagation of the idea that women should aim at marriage, family, and childbearing. Imagining a woman who has agency and hence the potential to occupy a managerial position is thus, often beyond them. The all-over unemployment rate (before the Pandemic induced economic crisis of 2020) is 7% in the country, whereas in the case of women, it is as high as 18%. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among Indian women has also dropped steadily in the last decade. While in 2004, 24% of women between the age of 15 and 24 were actively employed, in 2018, the rate came down to only 13%.

Another problem in the workplace is the pay gap. As of 2019, data women in India earn 19% less of what their male counterparts. At the same time, they are paid 34% less than a male with the same qualifications and an equal amount of work. India ranks 112th on the overall Global Gender Gap Index, which is released by the World Economic Forum. In both urban and rural areas, women are still getting paid meager amounts compared to the men, and while it is possible to measure the pay gap in the organized sector, it is increasingly difficult in the case of the unorganized sector. Women are perceived as having a low level of skills and are considered as temporary workers as it is believed that marriage and childbearing are the main functions of women and that once the events take place in their life, they will leave their careers. The existence of maternity leaves is often stated as a reason for the lack of competence in women, and it adds to the perception of women being short-term employees. This idea, which is associated with the woman worker, contributes to the ever-increasing Gender Pay gap and Unequal Pay.

Although household chores and responsibilities need immense management skills and extreme hard work, it is treated as an activity that requires no expertise or training and hence is rendered inferior in quality and less demanding. Women who stay at home are called homemakers or stay-at-home wives or mothers. They are not considered as working women, and hence their work can be very well be categorized as unpaid labour. In a joint family structure, the role of the women included housework, caring for the children and elderly, and governing the house.

In the modern nuclear family, however, the responsibilities have reduced due to the reduction of the family size and absence of the elderly.

Nonetheless, the duties and the responsibilities of the women of the house remain the same. Working women who are a part of the urban nuclear family are often overworked and worn out. Starting from meeting the needs of the children and the daily household, the modern-day Indian working woman also balances work outside the house, in demanding corporate jobs and sexist workplaces with challenging goals to meet. While fighting casual sexism and gender discrimination at the workspace, the woman also has to cater to the roles inside the family. In contrast, the male counterpart still enjoys relief from such functions and responsibilities inside the house. After coming home from a hard day at work, the man of the household, the husband, enjoys his leisure time in front of the television or doing whatever they choose to do for loosening up.

On the other hand, the woman, who has experienced similar kind of hardships or even more, has to attend to the chores which include cooking a meal, washing clothes, helping the children with their school work, preparing for the next day, and many other such tasks which need extreme hard work and attentiveness, which in turn cuts down on the much needed alone time that every human need. In her paper, *Gender and Generations perspective in Understanding Indian Family Life*, (Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Science and Humanities; Volume 1; Issue 3; Feb 2015; pp 137) Aparajita Chowdhury writes, "There are women, who are employed outside the home continue to assume primary responsibility of family life without adequate support and thus struggle hard than men with the actual balancing of work and family." The modern nuclear family has indeed put more pressure on the working woman. Surveys are now reporting how modern Indian women are preferring to stay with their in-laws just for the help they receive from them, regarding household and child-rearing. Although, even in the case of the old in-laws lending a helping hand, it is just the mother-in-law who helps her daughter-in-law. And hence, if it is not the modern educated woman, it is the old traditional woman who takes on the chores' responsibility.

Violence and abuse directed towards women in the Family – Effect on children and household.

Incidents of Violence are prevalent within the Indian family system. Cases of various forms of mental and physical torture, especially inflicted on women, often surface in news channels in the country. In-laws or other family members can be termed as domestic violence, and any sort of power meted out towards a woman by her husband, in-laws, or other family members. According to the National Family Health Survey data, almost 30% of Indian women have faced physical, emotional, or psychological abuse from their husbands at some point in their life. Apart from wife abuse, there are other forms of mistreatment inflicted on the children and the elderly. There is also no denying that men face violence at the hands of their wives, too, although the percentage varies in great severity. In the Indian family, domestic violence has been normalized to a precarious extent and is often not even considered as a sort of power. Instead, it is often perceived as a way of disciplining the woman or the child in that case.

In *Violence against women, with reference to 498 A and*

304 B, *Indian Penal Code*. (1997. Indian Journal of Social Work, 58, 582–597.) Gandhi says that certain factors, such as lack of education and poverty, make women more susceptible to be attacked by the males of the family. This takes us back to the question of agency and the treatment of women as objects and properties. In the traditional Joint Family structure, the women, most of the time, aren't allowed to work outside, and hence families which raise their daughters just to be wedded off, do not pay attention or place importance in the education of the girl. Because of neglect, the women stay far less qualified than their husbands. This causes an immense difference and imbalance in the amount of respect shared between the couple. While the man looks down upon the woman for her lack of knowledge, the woman looks up to the man as somebody who is naturally more intelligent and knowledgeable than them. This causes women to consent to a subordinate role and gives the man permission to demean and insult the wife. Thus, the relationship between the man and the woman becomes extremely hierarchical, which in turn makes the man look at the wife as someone who is always supposed to abide by his instructions, otherwise be punished.

In a 2015 study JEMDS, it was found that 19.09% of women in a collective family experience domestic violence, whereas only 3.33% of females from a nuclear family have to face it. The reason behind the significant difference might indicate the increased agency of women in the nuclear family pattern. The essential characteristic of a nuclear family is that it is free from the supervision of the in-laws, who have a significant role to play in perpetuating domestic violence, starting from physically attacking the daughter-in-law to manipulating the son to inflict punishment upon the wife in some way. In a family devoid of such factors, women enjoy more authority and agency and have a better chance of defending themselves. In a joint family, the woman is supposed to attend to not only the basic household chores but also the elderly and other members of the family who need assistance and support. More responsibilities lead to more stress, which affects the performance of a person. This leads to more space for the family to complain and leads to more chances of conflict between the husband and the wife. In a nuclear setup, there exists no excessive responsibility for the wife.

Moreover, in such a setup, the husband and the wife need to work extra hard to suffice for themselves due to the lack of the economic and social security that a joint family offers. In most urban nuclear families, both the people need to lend labour and time to maintain a household and contribute to home economics. Thus, there is often more understanding between the husband and the wife, which leads to the mutual desire of problem resolution is a decent way over words rather than physical violence and oppression.

Direct physical force is not the only way in which violence is perpetrated towards women in the family. Marital rape, psychological abuse, and emotional manipulation are seldom identified by the Indian society. The existence of these is the direct result of the ownership of the female mind and the body. Such atrocities on women have an alarming effect on the children of the family and often the other members such as the elderly. Domestic violence affects women, both physically and mentally. While the physical scars dry out and often vanish, the mental scars last a lifetime. Women who are victimized by the husband or the husband's family have to deal with long term mental health

issues. Almost none of the times are these recognized or treated. This, in turn, affects the mental health of the family, especially the children. Children who grow up in households looking at their fathers inflicting violence over their mothers bear the trauma throughout their lives. Often, they too grow a fatal bias against women and treat all other women in their lives as their father. When they learn from incidents that their mother isn't worthy of civil treatment, they look down upon women in general. A number of times, the site of a mother being tortured traumatizes a child. The child then carries this unresolved trauma inside themselves and, more often than not, lose all their faith in love, relationships, and companionships. Young girls, who are made spectators to such violence, start seeing themselves as less and inferior to the males, and often that is the reason why they cannot speak up for themselves when they face the same kind of treatment in their future. This is just another spiral in which somehow Indian women's agency, freedom, and voice are lost.

On the whole, the Indian society is yet to catch up with the existence of mental health and issues surrounding it. The family is instead the main space in which members repress their emotionality and live in denial. The lack of awareness around mental well-being and its connection to physical health has pushed back the Indian society at large. Suicide rates have increased over the years, and family is definitely an integral contributor. The psychological or emotional form of intimate partner violence is widely prevalent in India and is hardly ever recognized. Women in Indian families have, over time, gathered the skill of bargaining. A number of sociologists have worked with the Bargaining Theory or the Exchange Theory, namely Bloch, Rao, Pollack, and Lundberg. "Bargaining theory, sometimes called exchange theory, sees men's and women's employment and earnings as a source of dyadic power by providing individuals with a means of exchange within their relationship." (*Women's and Men's Relative Status and Intimate Partner Violence in India*, Abigail Weitzman, 2014).

In the traditional joint family system, women find it more challenging to bargain and gain something out of the husband due to the intense power position he has with the backup of the family. Whereas, in a nuclear family, it becomes easier for women to formulate a pact. One way in which such a contract is conceived is threatening to leave. Such a warning seldom works well in the case of joint family structures because the absence of the wife would not make a massive difference in the day to day life of the husband and the children, but in the case of a nuclear household, the husband often suffers from the chance of leading a lonely and clumsy life in the absence of the wife which also in most cases mean separation with children. How much one can bargain also depends on the resource, they generate within the family. Women who earn a substantial amount for the household have more agency and hence faceless abuse from their husbands. This is often just the case in middle-class urban households and the economic generation - agency relations differ from class to class and from city to village. A considerable percentage of rural Indian women are employed in the field with their husbands, but that does not alleviate their position in the household or present them with more agency to be treated as equal to their husbands. Similarly, in urban slums, where migratory nuclear families dominate, a considerable

majority of the women are employed as house helps and cooks, and many times they are the prominent earning member of households whose male members more often than not are victims of the vices such as alcoholism. In such homes, a session of wife-beating is a normal phenomenon almost every night and more so under the influence of alcohol.

Conclusion

The Indian family system and the transition that has taken place in its structure since the time of Independence is a vast field of study. Although sociologists have worked on these for more than four decades, there still remains a significant part that needs to be scrutinized and analyzed. With significant world events, economic turbulence, and globalization, the definition of family is changing for the upcoming generation, especially in urban areas. Women's Right movements and policies of empowerment have influenced the female population of the country at large, and there is growing resentment towards family among modern educated women living in contemporary India. While gender inequality is prevalent in any social and economic institution, the discourse surrounding women and their rights starts within the family. The nuclear family structure works much better for women than the joint family. In terms of agency, power, and respect, women hold a better position in two and four-membered families. To understand the intricacies of the complications and intersectionality of the status of women, there is a need for large scale research to assess the value of women and the perception of their existence as a part of the family system and how it has changed with the modification of the Indian family.

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